THE FAITH-DORIAN AND MARTIN WRIGHT COLLECTION, PART I

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THE FAITH-DORIAN AND MARTIN WRIGHT COLLECTION

We are pleased to present the first in a series of online exhibitions of masterpieces from the Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection. Most of the objects on offer are coming to the art market for the first time in over fifty years.

Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright

Faith-Dorian Wright (1934–2016) was an accomplished artist in her own right. Born in New York City, she was introduced to African art in the 1950s by her art teachers Hale Woodruff and Peter Busa, both of whom were collectors. She was particularly attracted to its psychological elements – the strong emotions it seemed to represent – and its formal reductions, its simplicity: "One incorporates human experience, the other fundamental use of basic forms." Wright's own work was influenced by African artists' use of organic materials, and she mixed acrylics with charcoal, chalk, ocher, and pigments from roots and leaves.

Martin Wright (1930–2018) was a successful lawyer and businessman. The collection the Wrights built together was largely formed in the 1960s and 1970s, the golden age of tribal art collecting in New York. Most of their early acquisitions came from New York dealer John J. Klejman, but they later worked with many of the important dealers of the time. Among the many superb works they owned was an iconic Hawaiian wooden bowl collected by eighteenth-century explorer Captain James Cook during his third and final voyage to Hawaii.

The Wrights are considered pioneers in raising the profile and collecting importance of Oceanic art, and pieces from their collection form the core of multiple museum collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Israel Museum. While the Wrights' primary collecting focus was Oceanic art, they acquired many important African and Native American pieces, as evidenced by objects in this catalog series.

Dori and Daniel Rootenberg
New York City, November 2020

1

MASK, *MBUYA*

Pende, D.R. Congo

Late 19th or early 20th century
Wood, fabric, fiber, pigment
17 ¾" h (incl. headdress)
Provenance:

- John J. Klejman, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on May 21, 1969

After being displaced from their former homeland in Angola by territorial expansion by the Lunda, the Pende resettled in D.R. Congo as two distinct but unified groups: western and eastern. The traditions of the western Pende include a group of over twenty danced masks known as *mbuya*, which personify a variety of village characters. Once used during *mukanda* initiation ceremonies to mark the end of circumcision rituals, *mbuya* masquerades now entertain the community during non-ritual festivities. Some *mbuya* share very similar features and can be difficult to differentiate without their full raffia dance costume and regalia.

The *mbuya* presented here, known as *fumu*, represents a chieftan. It offers a warm brown countenance with a highly protuberant forehead; large, heavily lidded eyes; strong, unified brow; pointed, upturned nose; and open mouth revealing pointed teeth. Stylized ears project horizontally outward. Atop the head is attached a dramatic, backward-slanting coiffure or hat that sweeps up into four tall points akin to horns, intensifying the mask's aura. The cheeks bear motifs that echo patterns found on other *mbuya*, which may be linked with powers of fertility. Fabric is bound tightly around the chin and cheeks of the mask with fiber. A richly textured patina enhances the deep, earthy browns and lends naturalistic suggestions that heighten the mask's impression of living potency.

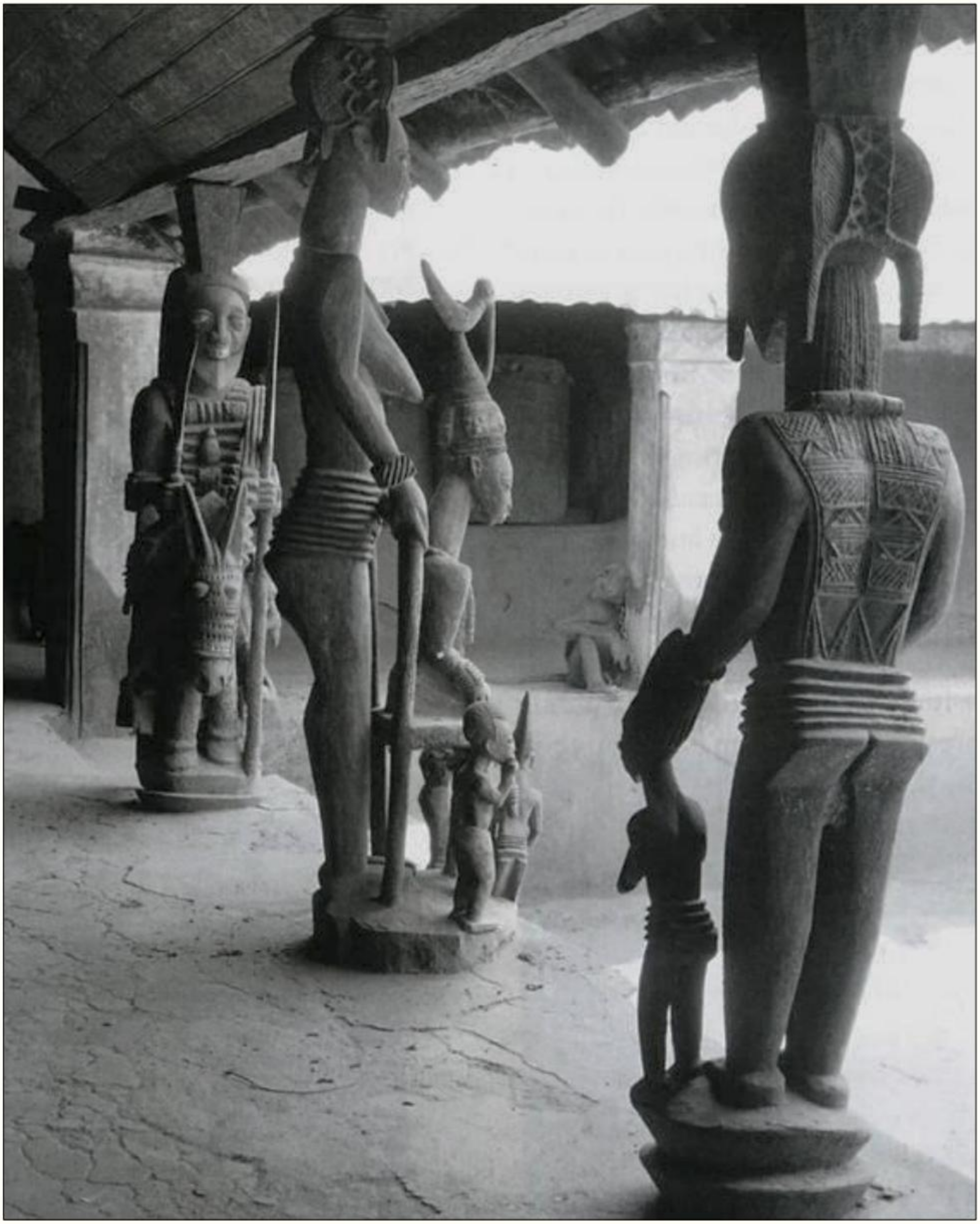
2
VERANDA POST
Yoruba, Nigeria

Early 20th century
Wood, pigment
74" h
Provenance:
- Ernst Anspach
- James Willis, San Francisco
- Michael Oliver, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

In Yoruba palace architecture, richly carved posts were incorporated into open-air verandas in courtyards, audience chambers, and façades, portraying elaborate stacked compositions of idealized characters of admirable virtues. Royal palaces were ambitious in scale and scope, and the carved posts within them were commensurately massive, sometimes featuring life-sized figures. The carvers of these works often learned in family ateliers, with distinct styles developed over generations, and the most distinguished individual carvers achieved great fame.

The impressive house post offered here is by the master Agbonbiofe of Efon-Alaaye (d. 1945) or his workshop. His carvings are found in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, Princeton University Art Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Saint Louis Art Museum, among others.

Two of the classic figures found in works of this type are seen here: a mother with children and a mounted warrior (*jagunjagun*). They are confidently carved with thick limbs, compact bodies and full, defined facial features. These are generalized images that in this context carry no particular symbolism. The maternity figure, which forms the lower portion of the post, depicts a seated mother nursing an infant and carrying a second child slung around her back. Her large eyes, domed forehead and slight smile project an air of benevolence and grace. A high coiffure supports the equestrian warrior above, who wears a tall helmet and holds implements in either hand. Astride his diminutive mount, he holds the horse's reins and gazes assuredly forward. A lovely blend of curved planes and sharp ridges define the face, which shows a handsomely structured profile and strongly projecting beard.



Veranda posts by Olowe of Ise in the palace courtyard of the Ogoga of Ikere, Ekiti, southwest Nigeria.

3
KACHINA FIGURE
Hopi, Arizona, Southwestern United States

First third of 20th century
Cottonwood, fiber, feathers, natural pigments
14" h
Provenance:
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

Kachina (*katsina)* dolls are carved representations of the Katsinam, spirit messengers from the ancestral underworld that embody aspects of life for the Hopi of the southwestern United States. Such dolls are traditionally used as teaching tools, given to girls in infancy to help them learn about the responsibilities they will bear in their communities as women. The doll presented here represents Hemis, one of the most popular of the three hundred Katsinam known in Hopi religion.

Hemis is most often seen at Niman, the post-summer solstice ceremony at which the Katsinam return to their homes until the start of the next ceremonial year the following December. The Hemis *katsina* is the first to bring mature corn to the people, and so is of great importance in Hopi ceremonialism. During festivals, long lines of dancers personifying this figure leap out of the circular, semi-subterranean chambers known as *kiva*.

The present figure is crowned with a magnificent headdress (*tableta*) of stepped design, white bordered with red and embellished with twelve phallic symbols representing fertility. Strong rectilinear design defines the classic *katsina* face, with wide-set, rectangular eyes in square panels separated by central ring motifs. Vertical stripes and corn motifs decorate the back of the helmet-like head. The figure's garb consists of white shoes, a skirt richly decorated with geometric designs, armbands, and a diagonal band that encircles the torso. The body is colored black, which in some Hemis figures would be achieved with black corn smut. The once-vivid yellow and red pigments that highlight the crown, face, and skirt have aged to lovely pastels. Feathers are attached to the *tableta* and head with fiber.

4
CARYATID HEADREST
Luba, D.R. Congo

Late 19th century
Wood
5 ¾" h
Provenance:
- John J. Klejman, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on October 11, 1967

Famous for their skill in figural sculpture, Luba artists often trained their talents for human representation upon another tradition that spans the African continent: the creation of beautiful headrests. Luba women adorned themselves with elaborately designed coiffures, visually striking and painstakingly prepared, and headrests protected them from damage during sleep. Such hairstyles can often be seen portrayed in headrest sculptures themselves, with kneeling figures sporting angular, backward-swept coiffures, most notably the multi-tiered "cascade" style.

Luba headrest figures cover a wide spectrum of stylization, from the naturalistic to the abstract. The present headrest bears the influence of both styles. While the overall figure is clearly recognizable, the structure has been reduced to rudimentary forms. Facial features are presented in simple shapes, arms take the form of bent tubes, folded legs disappear indistinctly beneath the figure. A stylized coiffure, notched above the forehead and at the fringes, projects straight backward in a horizontal, dual-tier configuration. The figure kneels on a round dais that is embellished with a band of overlapping hatch marks.

The densest area of detail is found on the figure's torso, which bears a group of conspicuous scarification designs. Luba women decorated their bodies with carefully applied patterns of keloid scars, some of which were extensive and quite elaborate, as this figure demonstrates. Gained through physical ordeal, these patterns were permanent emblems of prestige, strength, power, and sexuality.

5
PRESTIGE STOOL
Dogon, Mali

18th century or earlier
Wood
15 ¾" h
Provenance:
- John J. Klejman, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on February 5, 1974

Elaborate ceremonial stools of this kind were owned by the *hogon*, the supreme religious and political leader in each Dogon community. Rich with symbolism, the design and elaboration of these special stools draw inspiration from Dogon cosmology. The dual disks forming the base and seat are joined by a center post that represents the axis of the world, joining the earth and the heavens. Some sources have identified the figurative supports as protagonists from the Dogon account of Creation: four sets of twins, direct descendants of Nommo, the first living being. The undulating or zigzag motifs on the outward faces of these stools represent the fluid nature of Nommo, specifically the primordial ancestor Lebe Serou, who takes the form of a serpent. They also represent rain, without which there could be no life. Crocodiles, which are associated with water and fertility, are also a theme frequently depicted in the imagery of Dogon stools.

Classically composed, this stool features four figural pairs carved robustly in relief with strong limbs and protruding bellies. With arms upraised, their curving bodies are integrated into the support structure, powerfully spanning or traversing the space between the upper and lower worlds. The elongated heads of the figures, stretching upward in layered shapes, suggest reptilian forms. A rich, black patina is present, particularly prominent on recessed surfaces, and the outermost edges and features of the stool are significantly smoothed away from long age and use.

6
WAR SHIELD

Kominimung, Middle Ramu River, Papua New Guinea

Late 19th or early 20th century
Wood, rattan, natural pigments
49 ¼" h
Provenance:
- Everett Rassiga, New York, inv. no. 7657
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

A host of ghostly images decorates the upper half of this old Kominimung shield, incised and highlighted with strong contrasts of white. Following traditional design, a central, downward-pointing triangular panel is flanked by motifs arranged symmetrically. Numerous faces adorn the shield amid a host of other, more abstract symbols. The largest face, which occupies the central panel, represents an important ancestor, while the side panels contain specific clan emblems. These traditionally represent totemic animals, or more rarely plants or cosmic symbols, related in a mystical way to the clan of the shield bearer. The haunting effect of the composition, with its staring eyes and vibrating intimations of the spirit world, is heightened by its eroded surface.

Such shields were used in warfare, but when not in use they were displayed on the walls of men's houses. Rather than a carved handle, these shields were held by a carrying strap attached to the plaited matting that tightly girdles the lower portion of this shield. Though the fiber handle is now missing, the intact matting shows marvelous craftsmanship and beauty in its geometric, stepped cascade design.

7
EQUESTRIAN HEDDLE PULLEY
Attye, Côte d'Ivoire

Early 20th century
Wood, iron, metal, coin, fabric, glass beads
9" h
Provenance:
- Harold & Florence Rome, New York, acquired in New York in 1967
- Ben Heller, New York, acquired from the above
- Sotheby's, New York, *The Ben Heller Collection,* December 1, 1983, lot 88
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

Published in *African Art in American Collections, Survey 1989*, Warren M. Robbins & Nancy Ingram Nooter, Washington, DC/London, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989, p. 186, cat. no. 378

This exceedingly rare Attye heddle pulley depicts a horse and rider, the man clothed in a loincloth and the horse with the bobbin between its front ankles. The features of the horse are rudimentary, showing tube-like legs, bushy tail, and a round head with small ears, simple nose holes and inset white glass beads for eyes. The rider, with large head and small arms carved in relief, his skin a reddish brown, sits casually astride his mount. Above his high forehead is a simple coiffure, parted down the middle, with an iron suspension loop attached at the crown of the head. Soft facial features are set with glass bead eyes. Attached as part of the bobbin fastening is a coin dated to 1924.

Heddle pulleys are used in strip weaving, a process that uses very small looms to produce long, narrow strips of cloth that are later sewn together to create a larger textile, such as a blanket. The pulley is located at the very top of the loom and guides the weaver's thread.

This well-known pulley was previously in the collection of the renowned New York heddle pulley collector Harold Rome. Rome (1908–1993) was an American composer, lyricist, and writer for musical theater. A visit to the 1931 French Colonial Exposition in the Champs de Mars in Paris initiated his interest in collecting. Rome assembled one of the best pulley collections in the world and sold a large part of it to the New York tribal art dealer Ben Heller in 1979.

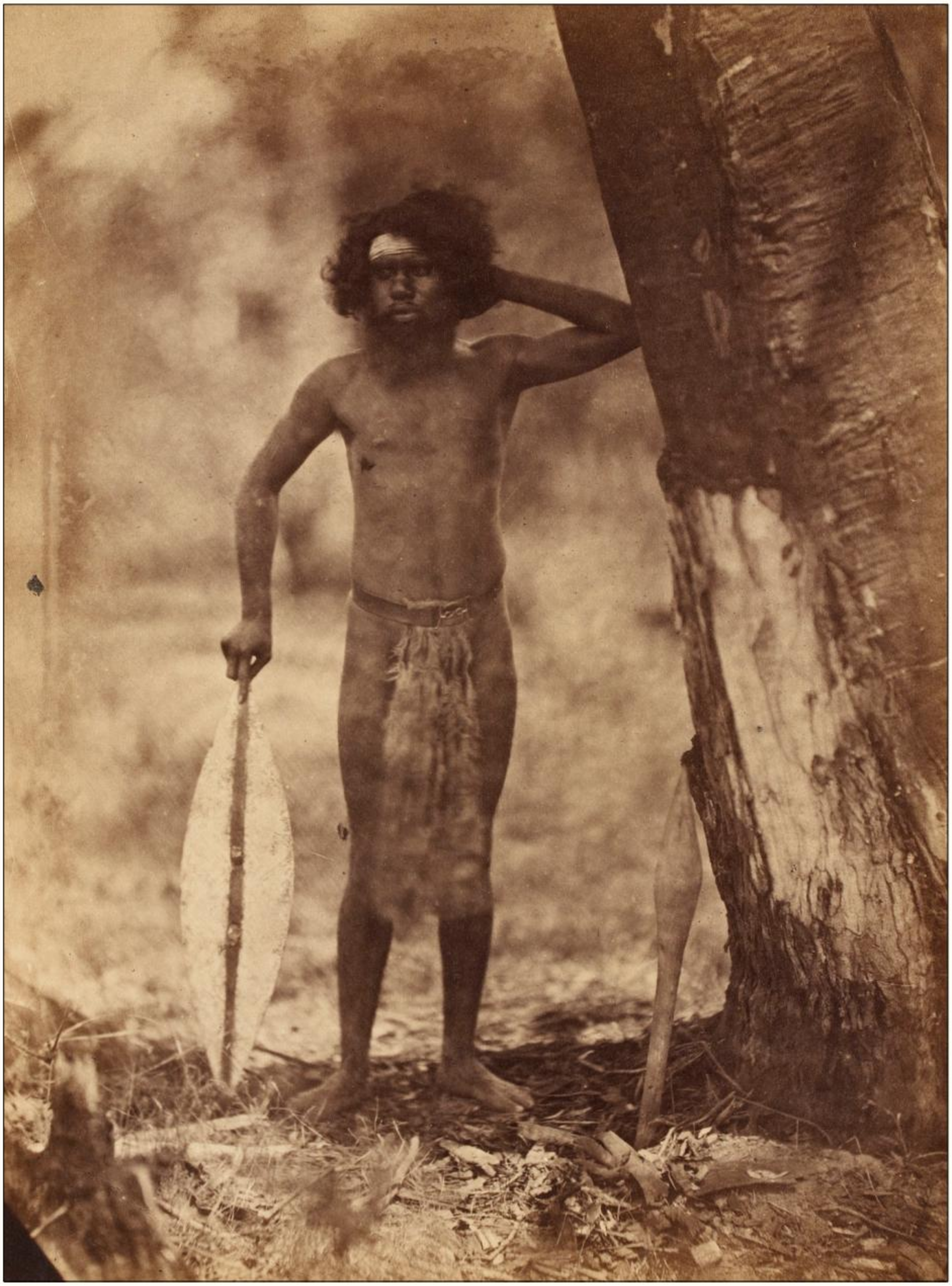
8
BROAD SHIELD
Southeastern Australia

First half of 19th century
Wood
36 5/8" h
Provenance:
- John J. Klejman, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on May 29, 1968

Traditional Australian shields were used in skirmish warfare, guarding their owners from spears, clubs, and boomerangs. They vary significantly in design based on use and location, ranging from tall and ovular to narrow and wedge-like. This early broad shield from southeastern Australia shows the beautiful, swelling, hourglass shape typical to the Murray River region. Closely spaced ranks of waveform incisions decorate the full face of the shield, creating an optical sense of rippling and undulation that is interrupted only by a wide band routed across the center. The ends of the curved handle push through to the front of the shield, appearing as circles floating above and below the central band. The thinness of the form, along with the overall concave shape, recalls a dried leaf or bark, and the rich patina attests to its significant age. An old label, reading *"Spear Shield – a very g[ood] specimen of Australian Aboriginal carved ornamental work,"* is affixed to the rear of the shield.

The manna gum tree (Eucalyptus viminalis) was often used to make these shields, which are known by a variety of Aboriginal names including *gee-am*, *kerreem* and *bam-er-ook*. Stone tools and animal incisors were used to engrave the surface with intricate designs. While there is virtually no historic information on the significance of the patterns on southeastern Australian shields, it is possible they represent emblematic designs symbolic of the owner's group affiliation or personal dreamings, or perhaps the ancestral beings whose actions created the features of the Australian landscape during the primordial creation period known as the Dreaming.

This shield is an extremely rare and exceptional example of its kind, amongst the finest to ever come to market.



Portrait of an Australian Aboriginal man with broad shield and club. Photographed by Antoine Fauchery and Richard Daintree between late 1857 and early 1859 for inclusion in their photographic series *Sun Pictures of Victoria*.

9
DANCE RATTLE
Haida or Tlingit, Pacific Northwest Coast

19th century
Wood, leather, paint
13 3/8" h
Provenance:
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

Rich with symbolic content, raven rattles are a distinct type of chiefly instrument, shaken rhythmically to accompany ritual movements. Their complex compositions take the form of the body of a raven, the trickster-performer creature who flies at the heart of many regional origin myths. On his back is a man, legs akimbo, his tongue held in the beak of a crested bird head formed by the tail feathers of the larger raven. In some cases it is a frog with whom the man shares this contact, interposed between the two participants. The belly of the raven reveals a large face with a hooked nose or beak.

The imagery of the joined tongue is one of potent shamanic content, and can be seen in a range of objects from argillite pipes to totem poles, depicting intimate spiritual contact or the transfer of esoteric knowledge and power. Often associated with healing ceremonies, such rattles are held with the bird's beak pointing downwards when used. The pebbles inside the body of the bird heighten the sensorial experience, producing a gentle rattling sound in tandem with the movement of the piece.

Raven is a highly significant and mercurial figure in the mythology of the Northwest, and the numerous, interconnected images of the rattle may be an expression of his shape-changing power. One of the many stories regarding Raven involves his bringing light into the world, symbolized in the rattle by the small disk held in the mouth of the raven. It has been suggested that the raven/human imagery of these rattles references Raven's own self-creation, being born through magical trickery as the grandson of Nass-shaki-yeil, keeper of the world's light. Nass-shaki-yeil was often depicted as a huge bird with a completely recurved beak, an image which the hook-nosed face of the rattle closely echoes.

The exquisite rattle presented here shows canonical composition with elegant, precise forms and beautiful formline embellishments in relief. The rear bird head, eyes emphasized in light blue, holds the frog at the tip of its beak before the shaman figure, which reclines deeply on the gracefully extended neck of the raven. The hook-nosed face upon the raven's belly is sharply designed and shows a vigorous expression with prominent teeth. A handsome palette of earthy reds, blacks and greenish blues provides a theme of understated contrast that unifies the composition while defining its details. The reddish shaman figure stands out distinctly against the smooth black of the raven's wings, one of which has been restored.

Portrait of Hamasoka, principal chief of a Kwakwaka'wakw village, with raven rattle and regalia.

10

THE FAITH-DORIAN & MARTIN WRIGHT FIGURATIVE FEAST BOWL

Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwakiutl), Pacific Northwest Coast, British Columbia

Circa 1780 or earlier
Hardwood, probably alder
43 ¼" l
Provenance:
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

An essay by Steven C. Brown, noted scholar, author and former curator of Native American art, Seattle Art Museum.

Kwakwaka'wakw (also known as Kwakiutl) feast dishes in this semi canoe-shaped design range in size from small, hand-held personal bowls to large examples five feet or more in length. A very few bowls of this type feature painted lobes in black or red on the wide, gunwale-like rim that encompasses the bowl, arched upward on the ends and curving downward and out along the sides. Finely carved parallel grooves on the rim and interior are the primary form of embellishment, and always follow the same general patterns; vertical on the interior ends, often parallel to the rim on the sides, and lengthwise, crosswise, or forty-five degree angles in defined quadrants on the bottom. In this bowl, two quadrants of lengthwise parallel grooves texture the bottom, one at each end. Exterior bowl surfaces are usually knifed smoothed, and sometimes decorated with finely cut rows of finish adzing.

This fine, early example is rare for the skill and precision that went into the grooved embellishments, which are unusually fine in scale and precisely parallel in execution. And in addition, few, if any, other bowls of this type feature sculptural embellishments like these; two humanoid figures, one peering over the rim of the bowl at each end. The rounded heads of the two figures are perched chin-up over the rim, with the fine grooving on the rim shifting from straight lines to curved rows encircling the heads. Once again, the viewer is impressed with the fine scale and precision of the grooved rows. The faces are each unique, as different from each other as two unrelated people. The identity of these figures can only be conjectured. Possibly representing ancestors, their hold on the bowl suggests they are the providers of foods served within it, such as smoked or boiled fish or roots.

The faces are carved less with precision than with true character. One face has its tongue visible between the lips. The eyes bulging within a hollowed eye socket, a prominent nose, and the mouth surrounded by a defined hollow area are all characteristics of the Kwakwaka'wakw style of carving that were maintained into the nineteenth century and survive today. Here the sculpture is accomplished with a series of small cuts, rather than the sweeping planes often seen in later Kwakwaka'wakw masks and monumental sculptures, which is due to the small scale here and the

(cont.)

different types of tools involved in the different timeframes. The same tool(s) employed to create the fine parallel grooves on the rim and interior were used to relief-carve the two faces. The faces display wear on the high points, the foreheads and noses, which is natural for prominent features on an object that's as old and clearly well-used as this bowl.

The arms of the two figures grasp the bowl at each end, bent at the elbows around the corners of the bowl. Five simply formed digits make up the hands, tucked under the flare of the sides below the rim. The figures' ears, hairlines and necks are neatly defined, and the broad shoulders of one figure are enhanced with slightly indented circles with domed centers that define the shoulder joints, much the same way circles and ovoids define joints in nineteenth century and contemporary Kwakwaka'wakw art. Why only one figure has this feature is not apparent, though it might indicate male and female identities. The ends of the figures' feet join the bowl just above the bottom, and their legs are bent sharply at the knees. The bodies of the figures are cleanly separated from the ends of the bowl by precise through-piercing that extends from the figures' waists up to their chests. The end of the bowl in front of them smoothly maintains its continuity.

The shaping of the figures' bodies was done in the end-grain of the wood, with the wood fibers passing through them by the shortest distance, from front to back. Both the backs and the bellies would therefore be of the most difficult to work cross-sections of wood. The same could be said for the beautifully grooved ends of the bowl, but because the ends slope outward from bottom to top, the end-grain wood is crossed at an angle, significantly improving its workability. The fact that the figures' bodies are so smoothly shaped and finished says a great deal about the skill and patience of the bowl's maker, echoed of course in the fine grooving and other finished surfaces. An old repair was made to stabilize a crack that developed in the rim of the bowl on one corner. Small steel or iron staples clench the crack closed and may be an original Native repair. High-ended bowls such as this often develop cracks in the end-grain due to changing humidity and moisture conditions.

The outer rim of the bowl has sustained a certain degree of wear, though it is consistent with the age and no doubt steady use of the bowl in its original Native environment. Nothing like this degree of wear appears on the dozens of examples of this bowl type (all without the sculpted figures) that can be found today in museums and private collections across the world. They have remained in better shape in part because, being younger, made more recently, the wood has retained its resilience and wear resistance. Being younger also means they were in service for a shorter amount of time. Northwest Coast hardwoods, such as alder, of which most of this kind of bowl were made, retain their wear resistance over several decades without breaking down. This bowl retains its degree of wear honestly, the result of its age and perhaps a century and a quarter or more of steady use.

Steven C. Brown
October 2020

11
ROOF SPIRE
Kanak, New Caledonia

First half of 19th century
Wood, organic material, pigments
89 ½" h
Provenance:
- French collection (based on old collection label)
- John J. Klejman, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on January 16, 1968

Architectural carvings were one of the primary forms of artistic expression for the Kanak people of New Caledonia. In the past, and to some extent today, the house of the chief was both the physical and the metaphorical center of every Kanak village. Such houses, known as *grande case,* were circular, with towering conical roofs crowned with carved finials that were visible from afar. These roof spires (*flèche faîtière*) were carved with anthropomorphic features and embodied the power of the chiefs over their subjects, standing high above the village.

Roof spires embody a tripartite design, with a central bust sitting on a wide base (attached to a long pole inserted into the roof of the *grande case*) and surmounted by a pointed peak, usually elaborated with additional motifs. The central face represents the ancestral spirits, symbolic of the community of the spirits of the departed and of the transition between the worlds of the dead and the living. This bust is also flanked or surrounded by hook forms that are intended to prevent malevolent spirits from enveloping the ancestor. Conch shells were sometimes attached to, or mounted on, the peak of the spire, symbolizing the ancestor's voice. Following the death of a chief, the *flèche faîtière* was placed atop his grave or in a memorial location specific to his clan. Kanak sculptors resorted to this startling, surrealistic solution in order to avoid lessening the chief's image.

This spire shows a streamlined silhouette and a contained, elegant composition with rounded forms balancing one another at the upper and lower ends. At the bottom of the wide base the neck of the support pole is still intact. The central element depicts a blackened bust with bulging eyes, bulbous nose and projecting ears, topped with a spherical crown that in turn supports a structure of angular motifs and leaf-like forms. Two sharp hooks descend from the structure to flank the face. The central, topmost shape, swelling like a paddle, stretches upward to a slender, tapering point. Taking in the elegant, powerful upward movement of the composition, one can imagine the dramatic visual effect achieved by the spire reaching up like a spear from the roof of the *grande case.* Intact spires are only rarely found, making this complete example all the more magnificent.

Upon the front face of the spire's main trunk is found an old, eroded catalogue label that in handwritten script reads "*New Caledonia – Ornament from the peak of a native house.*"

Nouvelle Caledonie

Nouvelle Caledonie.
Ornement du faite d'un
Maison des naturels

12

WAR SHIELD, *VAYOLA*

Massim, Kiriwina, Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea

19th century
Wood, cane, natural pigments
29 1/8" h
Provenance:

- Reportedly with Stevens, London
- Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, Rushmore, Dorset, presumably acquired from the above
- Alexander Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers, by descent from the above
- Captain George Pitt-Rivers, by descent from the above by 1927
- Stella Howson-Clive (Pitt-Rivers), by descent from the above by 1966
- Merton Simpson, New York, presumably acquired from the above via John Hewitt, London
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on June 14, 1967

Detailed, flowing designs cover the face of this wooden war-shield (*vayola*) from the Trobriand Islands, a group of coral atoll islands off the eastern tip of Papua New Guinea. Typical of the region, this shield is of squat oval shape, with a double grip on the back, and its curvilinear designs are painted in the local black-and-red color scheme. Elaborately designed shields were used only by the most distinguished warriors; those of lesser esteem used plain ones. Although the designs painted on *vayola* are always similar, no two shields are ever exactly the same.

Sculptors from the Trobriand Islands were prolific carvers, covering the surface of almost every conceivable object with their distinctive abstract and semi-abstract designs. *Vayola* are a notable exception in this regard, their designs being only lightly scored before being executed in paint.

Warfare in the region was prosecuted with long thrown spears, wooden clubs, and shields. Before Trobriands men went to war, the village magician would cast a spell over each shield by resting it on his knees and whispering his spell into the decorated surface from a few centimeters away, empowering it with his breath. As a result, the shield became impervious to spears. The painted designs themselves were conceived to have magical powers that could be invoked to help ensure survival and success in combat.

The meaning of these shields' designs has been much debated. Sexual intercourse figures largely in many interpretations, but some scholars have seen the design as representing a flying witch called a *mulukuausi*, the most fearful thing in Trobriands mythology, which would terrify the enemy. A number of culturally important animals, such as hornbills and snakes, may be encoded in the abstract motifs. Other experts believe the images represent a single human figure, much like the shell-inlaid figures on high-status shields from the nearby Solomon Islands, the design representing the path by which a magician sends his power out into the world from inside his body.

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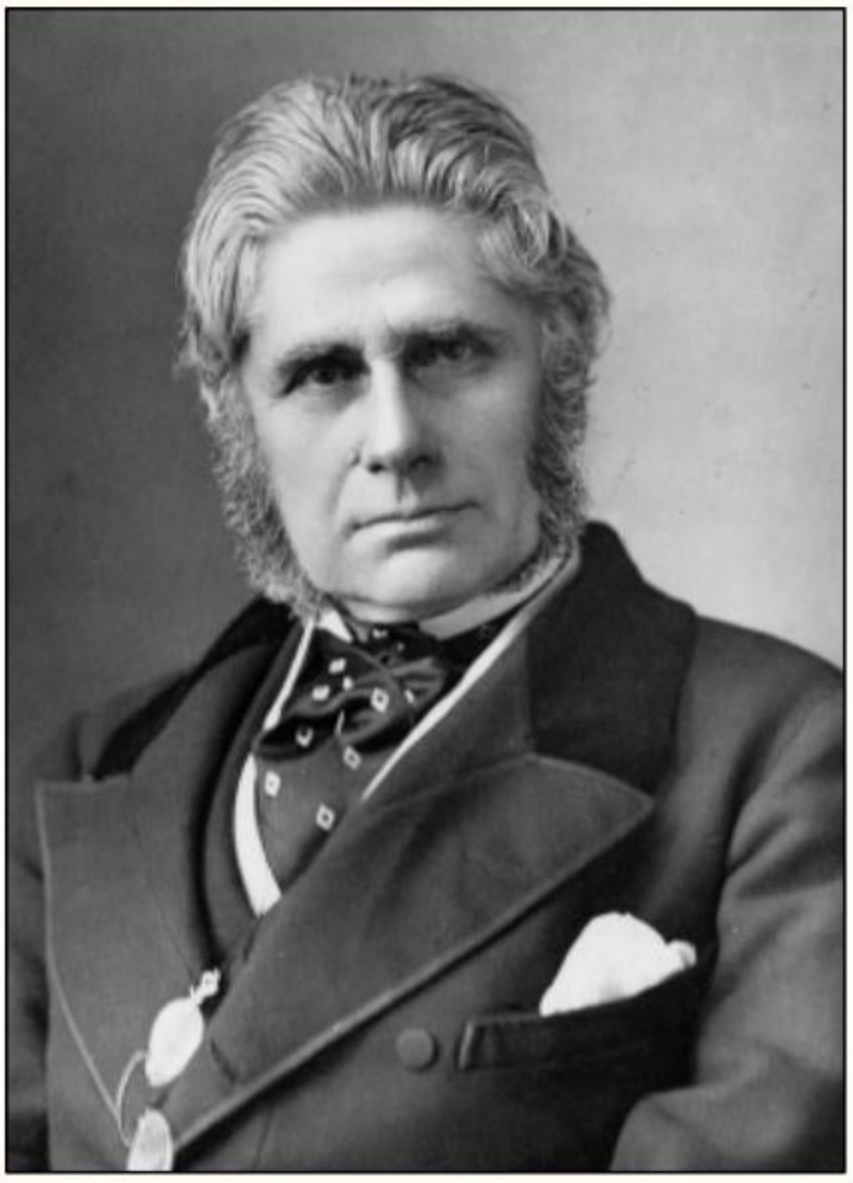
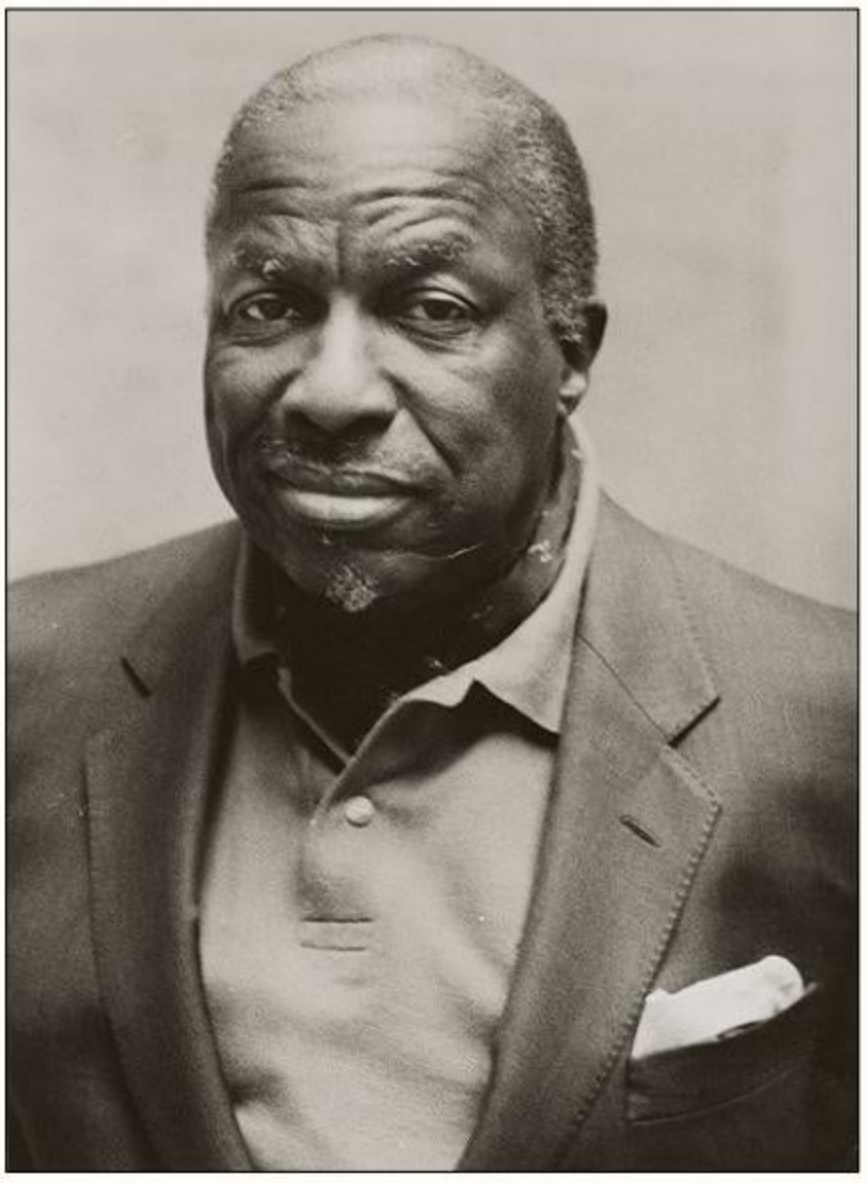
This particular shield has a storied provenance. One of its earliest and most distinguished European owners was celebrated archaeological innovator, ethnologist, and collector Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers. The shield remained in his family's possession for several generations, from the nineteenth century until the mid-1960s, at which point it came into the collection of painter and gallerist Merton Simpson.



Augustus Henry Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers



Merton Simpson

13

PORO SOCIETY MASK, *ANGBAI*

Toma/Loma, Liberia or Guinea

Late 19th or early 20th century
Wood, metal, animal skin, organic material, pigment
21" h
Provenance:
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York
Exhibited in *Western Artists/African Art*, Museum for African Art, New York, 1994
Published in *Western Artists/African Art,* Daniel Shapiro, ed., Museum for African Art, New York, 1994, p. 96, cat. no. 46

Imposing and mysterious in appearance, this *angbai* mask was used during ceremonies of the Poro society, a profoundly influential group among the Toma and their Guinea Coast neighbors that preserved political order and governed land use, initiation ceremonies, marriage, trade, and more. *Angbai* masks depict a number of incarnations of the great spirit, Afwi. The most common are Landai, a forest spirit that embodies the power of Poro, and Nyangbai, his wife.

One of the main responsibilities of the Poro was the initiation of young boys. Held in seclusion at a forest camp, initiations inculcated youths with the adult values of co-operation, solidarity, and respect for the elders. During one climactic rite the boys are metaphorically devoured by Landai, embodied in the *angbai* mask, and are reborn as men. In the past, initiates would receive cicatrization over the back and shoulders that was symbolic of the bite wounds inflicted by the spirit.

Angbai masks are rare and the present piece is an exquisite example of its type. The face adopts an elongated, semi-oval form, midnight blue in color and segmented by a number of metal strips. From the center point of the face, below the cross-shaped juncture of the sharp brow and nose bridge, three strips spread downward and out, dividing the lower face into quadrants. A wider band separates the high forehead from the three rounded horns and crown of the head that surmount the mask, and around the perimeter of the face are attached several pieces of hide. The surface of the upper forehead shows evidence of having once been decorated with additional applied motifs. Two small round eye holes, closely set against the nose, peer out from the shadow beneath the horizontal brow line. The minimal design communicates a deep inner strength and authority, elevating the mask's spiritual power.

14

CANOE PROW ORNAMENT, *NGUZU-NGUZU*

New Georgia, Solomon Islands

Late 19th or early 20th century
Wood, black lip pearl oyster shell
8 ¼" h
Provenance:
- John J. Klejman, New York
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York, acquired from the above on May 29, 1968

Exhibited in *The Art of the Pacific Islands*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, 1979
Published in *The Art of the Pacific Islands,* Peter Gathercole, Adrienne L. Kaeppler, and Douglas Newton, Washington, DC, 1979, p. 233, cat. no. 15.18

Early Solomon Islanders carried out headhunting expeditions in large, highly decorated canoes capable of holding several dozen warriors at once. Ornaments with human features, called *nguzu-nguzu* (or *musu-musu*), were attached to the canoe's tall prow, just above the waterline. Generally believed to represent spirits who provided protection and guaranteed the success of expeditions, it has also been suggested that the pronounced heads were intended to strike fear of decapitation into enemies.

Nguzu-nguzu have been documented as early as the middle of the 18th century in the journal of French soldier, navigator, and explorer Louis de Bougainville, who gave his name to the northernmost of the Solomon Islands. Most figureheads are decorated with black lip oyster shell inlays in patterns which replicate those found on the faces of warriors. This example features decorative inlay at the forehead, chin, eyes and teeth. The domed head or coiffure, projecting forehead, and sloping face are confidently carved in canonical style. Arms reach from behind the jaw to bring the hands together under the chin, providing support for the carving in its exposed place at the prow of the canoe.

War canoe in the western Solomon Islands in front of canoe houses, 1910. British Museum Pictorial Collection Images. The Trustees of the British Museum.

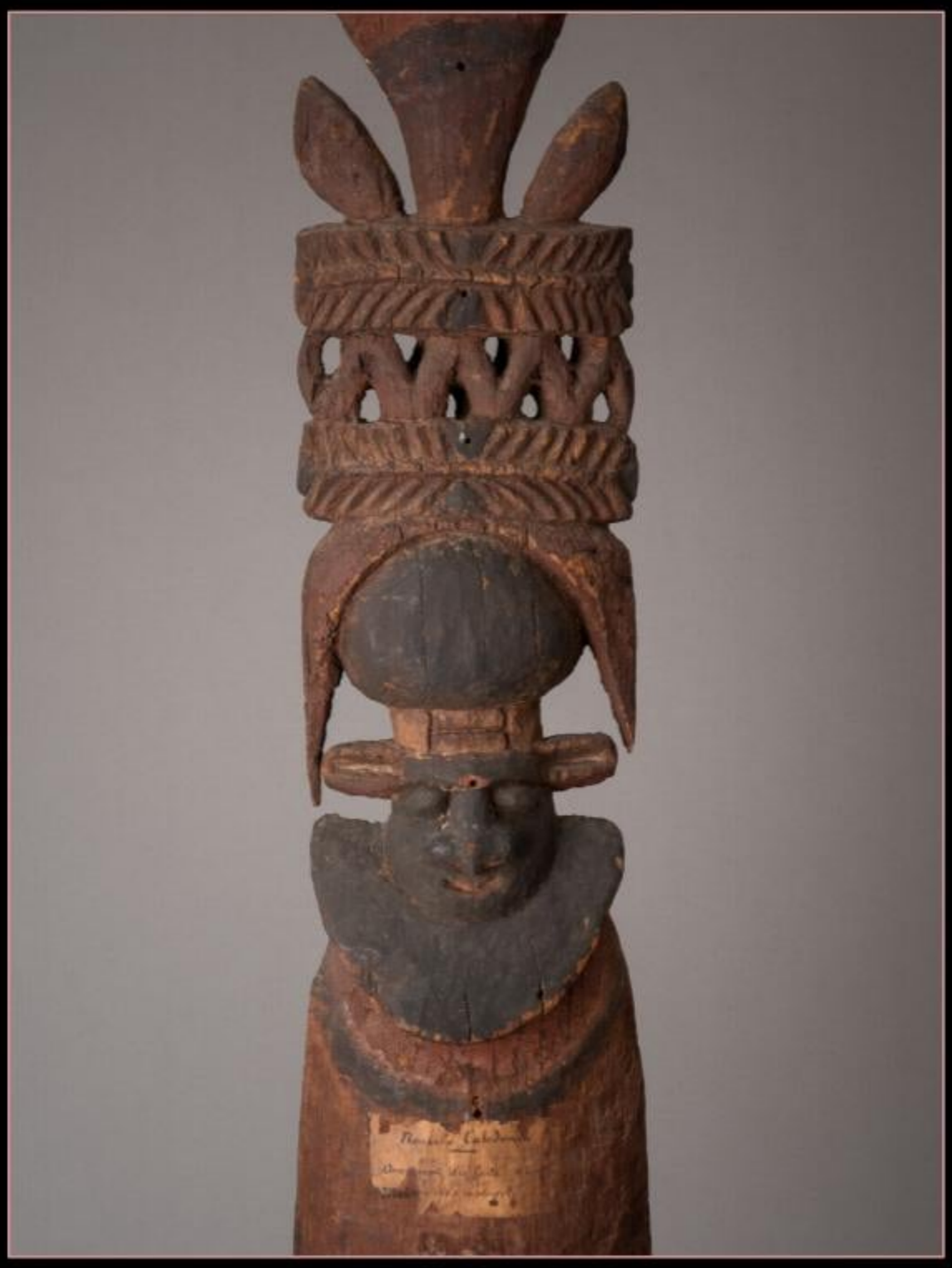
15
SPIRIT BOARD, *GOPE*
Papuan Gulf, Papua New Guinea

Late 19th century
Wood, natural pigments
51 ¾" h
Provenance:
- Faith-Dorian and Martin Wright Collection, New York

In the Papuan Gulf region, the primary focus of traditional religious and artistic life was on powerful spirits known as *imunu*. Each *imunu* typically was associated with a specific location in the landscape, rivers, or sea, and was linked to the specific clan whose territory encompassed that location. The peoples of the region represented and revered the *imunu* through the creation of spirit boards (*gope*), two-dimensional carvings featuring figures and designs carved in low relief and colored with ochre and pigment. Each served as a dwelling place for an individual *imunu,* whose image appears on it.

Villages formerly had huge, communal, peak-roofed men's houses called *ravi*, where ceremonial clan objects were kept safe and hidden from the uninitiated. The men's house was divided into cubicles allotted to a particular clan or subclan, each of which contained a clan shrine, which housed *gope*, figures, skull racks, human and animal skulls, and other sacred objects associated with the clan's various *imunu*. *Gope* helped to guard their clanspeople from harm and aided them in headhunting and warfare, offering concealment and weakening enemies in advance of a raid.

The present gope takes a narrow oval form, tapered and pointed at the top and bottom ends. Carved in low relief, the surface designs are brought out with white ochre. The face of the *imunu* peers out from the upper section of the board, joined by a number of symmetrical, hooked motifs reminiscent of grasping arms. A circular navel is found at the center of the board, echoed by a number of concentric circle motifs positioned down the length of the board. Taken as a single composition, the independent shapes seem to conspire to depict a full human figure.



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